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A Common Language of Urban Design Andres Duany

The Congress for the New Urbanism is organized around nine task forces. One of them, chaired by Andres Duany and Stefanos Polyzoides, was chartered to establish a common nomenclature. This group originally proposed to complete a lexicon, conceived as an alphabetized list of useful terms accompanied by their definitions.

This straightforward conception soon foundered, however, as it became apparent that most of the elements to be defined could only be understood properly in relationship to others. It seems that with authentic urbanism, no less than with true environmentalism, a tug on anything rustles something elsewhere. Rather than alphabetical order, urbanism calls for its terminology to be grouped within taxonomies of related terms.

This established, it seemed natural to classify these elements according to their most common attributes. For example, it is possible to range open spaces according to size or by environmental performance; thoroughfares could be grouped by relative traffic capacity and building types classified by function or arrayed according to the frontage that each occupies.

Such disparate taxonomies however, do not support the integrated conception that authentic urbanism requires. They tend instead, to confirm the nomenclature of the specialists — that babel of planners, traffic engineers, environmentalists, urban designers, landscapers, architects, preservationists, land use attorneys, developers, bankers and marketing experts — that is the current language of suburbia.

This characteristic of suburbia is the origin of its failure. Despite being designed through a process that engages all these specialists, the product is rarely blended properly. Each profession is permitted to impose its perquisites, with the result usually being a collection of urban elements rather than urbanism itself. The streets are designed exclusively for traffic flow; the natural environment is circumscribed and disruptive to pedestrian connectivity; shopping centers, office parks and residential areas are conceived in isolation; self-referential buildings ignore streets while fantastical landscaping ignores buildings. Such collections may well demonstrate all the elements of towns and cities statistically, but they are really just cartoon versions of the real thing.

The search for a unified taxonomy yielded the chance discovery of the Transect. This term is defined as a system of classification deploying the conceptual range of "more rural" to "more urban" to arrange in useful order the typical elements of urbanism. The transect quickly proved to be a natural ordering system, as every important element easily finds a place within its continuum. For example, a street is more urban than a road, a curb more urban than a swale, a brick wall more urban than shingled one, an allee of trees more urban than a cluster. Even the character of streetlights can vary from metropolitan to rustic, depending on whether they are fabricated from cast iron, extruded pipe or wood posts.

Beyond being a system of classification, the Transect has the potential to become an instrument of design. The correlation of the various elements by a common rural-to-urban continuum can be the basis for a system of zoning. No more than five sections are necessary to calibrate the transect to the neighborhood structure (which is the precondition of authentic urbanism at any density). These are the Edge, General, Center, Core and District Zones.
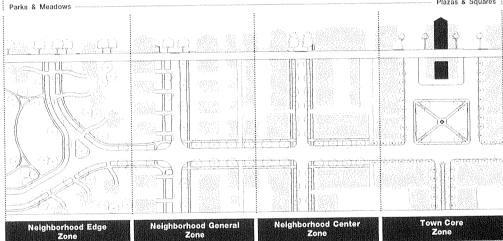
Range of the Transect

This list shows some of the terminal conditions of the urban to rural continuum. Interestingly, the transect can even be extended to artifacts unrelated to urban design: certain vehicles, clothing, shoes, furniture and food belong to the town or to the country. So powerful are these conventions, that to ignore them may be seen as gauche, even within current, eroded standards.

Less Density	More Density
Primarily Residential Use	Primarily Flexible Use
Smaller Buildings	Larger Buildings
Most Buildings Detached	Most Buildings Attached
Rotated Frontages	Aligned Frontages
Articulated Massing	Simple Massing
Wooden Buildings	Masonry Buildings
Pitched Roofs	Flat Roofs
Overhanging Eaves	Taut Cornices
Deep Setbacks	Shallow Setbacks
Fences	Street Walls
Local Gathering Places	Regional Institutions
Road & Lane Sections	Street & Alley Sections
Paths & Trails	Cross-Block Passages
Narrow Moving Lanes	Wide Moving Lanes
Curvilinear Trajectories	Rectilinear Trajectories
Three-way Intersections	Four-Way Intersections
Opportunistic Parking	Dedicated Parking
Larger Curb Radius	Smaller Curb Radius
Narrow Sidewalks	Wide Sidewalks
Open Swales	Raised Curbs
Sporadic Task Lighting	Even Street Lighting
Picturesque Landscaping	Aligned Allees
Mixed Tree Clusters	Single Tree Species
Parks & Meadows	Plazas & Squares

Illustration of the Transect

This diagram gives a general idea of the techniques which are derived from the transect above and controlled by the zoning categories below.

Shared Zoning Categories

An early contribution of this Operating System is to correlate several models of community structure which are variants within New Urbanist practice. The O.S. allows them to retain their particulars while sharing a common zoning language.

Neighborhood Edge Zone	Neighborhood General Zone	Neighborhood Center Zone	Town Core Zone
			City
		Town	
	Village		
Hamlet			
			Urban Village
			Quarter (Krier)
		Transit Oriented Development - Urban TOD	
	Transit Oriented Development - Neighborhood TOD		
	Traditional Neighborhood Development - TND		
	Neighborhood Unit 1929		
Rural Village			
Cell			

The first three zoning categories follow the natural internal structure of the neighborhood. The Core is assigned to the intensification that occurs where several neighborhoods conjoin. The District accommodates those specialized places that are necessary to a complete community, but must be zoned away as they would be disruptive within the neighborhood fabric.

There are two benefits to an integrated system of zoning like this one. First, it would make impossible the isolated prescriptions of specialists. Second, each zone would be an immersive environment, a place where all the component elements reinforce each other to create and intensify a specific character. Several such immersive environments within a single neighborhood would provide a certain variation of lifestyle, this in contrast to the vast, homogenous tracts of suburbia.

The evolution of this document into a proactive instrument has made the original title obsolete. "Lexicon" is too static a term to describe this extension of capability. The more representative "Operating System" is now provisionally applied to describe it.

The most important contribution of the Operating System may be to implementation. Experience shows that new urbanist projects are technically difficult to permit. The codes and manuals now in place, despite the appearance of objectivity, recognize only conventional suburban programs. To introduce a new urbanist project into such a system is akin to running a computer application on an incompatible operating system, a condition requiring great effort to create an interface which is destined never to run optimally anyway.

The current North American standard is a suburban-based operating system that does not process authentic urbanism. To succeed in its mission, the Congress for the New Urbanism must create and propagate an alternate standard. The proposed transect-based operating system will be neither imposed nor protected, but confirmed in this role through empirical success. It is as comprehensive as the current standard, it is easier to use and it results in better places to live.

— Andres Duany is a board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism and principal of DuanyPlater-Zyberk, Architects and Town Planners.